

Honoring their Service

The Hill

February 11, 2008

The duty we owe to those we ask to pay "the last full measure of devotion" transcends politics and partisan pettiness. In this we can find agreement-we owe no greater duty than the one we owe members of the Armed Forces and their families.

As we ask our troops to stand in harm's way, as we send them to war, our duty to our soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines must remain paramount. As they protect us, we must protect them.

Each of them is a son or a daughter, a husband or a wife, a parent or a child, a brother or a sister. Tens of thousands are immigrants. Countless others have spouses or other close relatives who are immigrants or have immigration issues.

Our duty to these brave men and women obligates us to ensure, even in small measures, that their focus stays on their mission and on the safety and security of those they serve with.

We must also do all we can to reduce the stresses of war on the families of these brave men and women. The wives, husbands, children, parents, brothers and sisters of our soldiers agonize every minute of every day for their loved ones who stand in harm's way. They do double and triple duty while their loved ones are away.

A Mismanaged Agency, A Failed Opportunity

Our soldiers should not have to fight bureaucratic barriers and pointless paperwork as they navigate the immigration system. It's not fair to make them. And it can have deadly consequences.

When Army Reserve Sgt. Kendell Frederick applied for U.S. citizenship, he assumed that the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) would process and approve his application quickly. After all, he was slated for deployment to Iraq.

However, the process didn't go smoothly, dragging on for months. Between paperwork mix-ups and misfiled fingerprints, Sgt. Frederick's application languished at USCIS.

In the meantime Sgt. Frederick was deployed with his unit to Iraq.

Having been told that he needed a new set of fingerprints even though he had previously been fingerprinted by USCIS and the Army, Sgt. Frederick set out to a nearby base in Iraq to have yet another set of fingerprints taken.

He never made it back. On his return trip to base, a roadside bomb tore through the vehicle Sgt. Frederick was riding in, he didn't survive. Sgt. Frederick gave his life for a set of fingerprints.

This administration has mismanaged the business of delivering vital immigration services. Nowhere has this been more evident than in taking care of the needs of soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines.

We've seen seven years of wasted opportunity from a President who consistently spoke about the need for immigration reform. This administration, so adept at neglect, has missed far too many chances to break from the failures of the past and transform a languishing agency.

Today, USCIS is no closer to modernizing its service delivery than when this President took office. By almost any measure, USCIS is worse off than its predecessor-the INS-as if that were even possible. USCIS still has no means to store and retrieve fingerprints.

Congress has continued to push USCIS to modernize, recently passing H.R. 2884, the "Kendell Frederick Citizenship Assistance Act," which would require USCIS use military fingerprints to adjudicate naturalization applications filed by soldiers. H.R. 2884 is a good start, but it's just that, a start. We must not abandon the effort.

Serving the Needs of Soldiers and Their Families

For our troops, peace of mind about the home front is the ultimate comfort. When our soldiers or their family members face immigration issues, it clouds their focus and effectiveness.

We must do all we can to relieve the burden our service members face.

Last year, I was privileged to meet Petty Officer Second Class (Air Warfare) Eduardo Gonzalez when he testified before the Immigration Subcommittee. A United States citizen, Eduardo enlisted in the United States Navy in 2003 after graduating from high school and going on to earn an Associate's degree in occupational studies. Eduardo has been deployed to Iraq three times, on ship and shore.

Eduardo was married in 2004 to his long-time girlfriend. They now have a son. When they married, Eduardo's wife had been waiting for more than four years to get her green card. What neither Eduardo nor his wife realized was that simply by getting married she would no longer be eligible to get her green card because her application was dependent on her being the single child of her mother.

Eduardo's wife came to the U.S. from Guatemala when she was five years old. She had waited for years for USCIS to process her case. Now, she is in danger of being deported.

When I talked to Eduardo, he expressed the great burden his wife's immigration difficulties placed on him. They were distracting. He told me how he constantly worries about her, and how he feared that she might be deported while he was at sea in a combat zone. He worried that their child would be left without a mother and a father.

For that reason, I believe that we must change the law to provide immigration assistance to immediate family members of American soldiers.

It would be one small measure we could do for those we ask to pay the last full measure of devotion for us.

